

Matthew 2: 1-12 *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'* ³ *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* ⁴ *When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.* ⁵ *'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."* ⁷ *Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.* ⁸ *He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'* ⁹ *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.* ¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.* ¹¹ *On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.* ¹² *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

This passage will be familiar to many people and there are some assumptions made about these wise men or Magi which are not found in the text.

Firstly, the word in Greek is Magi, and this refers to Persian astrologers as well as astronomers, who served in the temples of Zoroastrian believers. Zoroastrians believe in one God who is the supreme being and creator, and a number of lesser deities who battle against God. They believe that there is a constant battle between good and evil in the world and in the heavenly realms. Their religion was the main one in Persia from the days of Cyrus the Great, 600 BC, to the Islamic expansion in the seventh century AD.

Secondly these men came to Jerusalem after seeing an unusual star and attached to it a significant event in Judea, that a king was born. No one among the Temple priesthood seemed to have been aware of the star, and it wasn't at Bethlehem, but Jerusalem. There is just one reference to a star in the Old Testament indicating the coming of a king. It is in the days of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness when the prophet Balaam is instructed by the King Balak of Moab to curse Israel. Numbers 24:17-19 *'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth. ¹⁸ Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. ¹⁹ A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city.'* Balaam came from Pethor on the Euphrates river in what is now north east Syria, and was able to have a conversation with God, in the same way Moses did. He prophesied over Israel and could not curse her. What comes across is that there were men who communicated with God who were not the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Magi seem to be able to do so as well, and have the knowledge of what the star meant for the Jews.

Thirdly, what was this star that rose before them and they could follow?

Actually there is nothing to say that they "followed the star" at all from Persia to Jerusalem. The star rose and they travelled to Jerusalem. Later it went ahead of them on the way to Bethlehem and remained over the place where Jesus was. People have tried to figure out what this astronomical event actually was. Eusebius, a scholarly church historian of the early fourth century, evidently made a considerable study of the literature available from the centuries before him, and came to this conclusion about the star. **"The star was new and a stranger among the usual lights of heaven, a strange star besides the usual ones, a strange and unusual star, not one of the many known stars, but being new and fresh."**

Now we assume that Jews didn't do astrology – star signs and all that kind of thing, which we know is associated with pagan religions. However there is an old mosaic in the Beth Alpha synagogue in the Jezreel valley with the twelve astrological stars signs on the floor. The Essenes at Qumran had a number of astrological texts, because they were looking to the stars to forecast or precede important events, in the same way the Magi were in Persia, especially in Babylon. There is a lot of astronomical imagery in Revelation 12:1-5 *A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ² She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. ³ Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon*

with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. ⁴ Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. ⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.' And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

If we look at Psalm 19:1-4 we see that the stars and the sun speak to us and somehow communicate knowledge. That may sound fanciful, but astrologers believe the stars and their movements in conjunction with the planets do actually affect people. The Essenes in Qumran, like many other ancient people, believed that searching the heavens would reveal knowledge and one of the Dead Sea scrolls is about horoscopes. Psalm 19:1-4 *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. ³ They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. ⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*

At some point the bright star Regulus (king of the stars) and the planet Jupiter (king of the planets) intersected in the constellation Leo (the sign of the tribe of Judah) and below them is the constellation Virgo (the only female star sign) which is very close to the sun and then lower down is the moon. This happened on 11 September 3BC, which was Rosh Hosanna, the day of the trumpets and the Jewish new year which also is the day marked as the first day of the reign of all the kings of the line of David. Dr Michael Heiser, a Hebrew scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, has worked all this out. He read the stars and planets over Jerusalem which appeared at this time and what he saw coincides with what the Magi saw. The Magi and Dr Heiser, put two and two together to make four: from a virgin or woman (Virgo and the Sun) a child (moon) would be born who would be king (Regulus & Jupiter) of the Jews (Leo).

Whatever you may believe, the narrative of Matthew is that the Magi read the stars and communicated with God. The Pharisees were liberal Jews compared to the conservative Essenes and Sadducees, and didn't believe in mumbo-jumbo astrology. However, they knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, so sent the wise men there, having stuck together two quotes from the prophets in a way which we might think is out of context but possibly not! Micah 5:2 *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,* and 2 Samuel 5:2 *"You shall shepherd my people Israel, and you shall become their ruler."*

At Court of Nebuchadnezzar and later Darius, Daniel was chief of the wise men in Babylon. He was saved from being executed by Nebuchadnezzar for interpreting his dream without being told what the dream was. Darius's decree resulted in him being in the lions' den, but God saved him. The wise men of Babylon would probably know the Hebrew Scriptures, and certainly the five books of Moses which includes the Balaam prophecy, because Daniel would have taught them the truth. The God of Daniel saved all the wise men at Court as they were all going to be put to death for failing to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream. There was a continuity of knowledge over the hundreds of years that there were still wise men in Babylon, and we have no reason to suppose that they didn't know what Daniel had revealed to them.

So off the wise men go and present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold for kingship, frankincense for worship and myrrh for death and mourning. Three gifts, but not necessarily just three wise men – more likely quite a delegation from the Parthian empire, which was not at war with Rome then. King Herod would have been a bit wary of them as a vassal king under Rome having the enemies' advisers visit might have upset the Romans who always doubted the loyalty of vassal kings.

After the wise men left Jesus who with his parents now had a house in Bethlehem, they are warned by God to go home without reporting back to King Herod, who then has all boys under two slaughtered in Bethlehem. King Herod wasn't a Jew himself, but he did believe the wise men's words that a king was born, and the Temple scribes said he would be born in Bethlehem.

So what can we take from this passage? Like Balaam over 1400 years earlier, there were men with whom God communicated who were not descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Today there are people who see Jesus in dreams and visions, who are not believers. God is sovereign. Thinking that before Jesus and the coming of Holy Spirit, only the Jews had contact with God as his chosen people has no Biblical foundation. When it comes to rational thinking, it is presumptive to assume that the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Hebrews, all the ancient peoples were not able to look at evidence and draw conclusions which are entirely rational given what they knew without the

benefit of modern science and mathematics. Scripture contains wisdom and prophecy as well as history. It all hangs together but perhaps not in the way modern man would put together the revelations of God to mankind. We are corrupted by our own desires and believe what we want to believe and reject what we don't want to believe. Science claims to be rational and evidence based, but there is so much that cannot be explained which accepted as reality while much of the revelation of Scripture that cannot be explained is rejected. In the ancient world, it was natural that men heard from God, but by the time of Jesus, Greek reasoning had taken hold of sects like the Sadducees, who rejected the words of the prophets and only accepted the Torah. They stubbornly believed that God spoke to Moses and after him no one else had anything relevant to say. Eyes that are blind, ears that are deaf existed then, and exist today, especially among those who believe stuff which is fantasy and wishful thinking. Whole philosophies are based on wishful thinking, most of which are based on the assumption that man is good rather than sinful. The devil wants men to turn away from God and puts thoughts into their heads that they know better than God and that God's revelation of truth is questionable. "Did God really say that?" was the first question of the serpent. The wicked King Herod was just like that. Surely if God had said something would happen, trying to stop it happening would be futile. Balaam couldn't curse those whom God blessed, and his attempts to do so were futile. Today, we need to be ready for what God says will happen like the parable of the ten virgins, of whom five had spare oil and were ready with lamps trimmed to meet the bridegroom. Are we ready?